



The scene at the San Diego Yacht Club, the home base of skipper Dennis Conner, was one of jubilation as Stars & Stripes crosses the finish line to bring home the America's Cup. AP photo

## Rejoicing, reservations abound at Conner's club

By Dean Nelson  
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SAN DIEGO — It had all the glitz and pizzazz of a national political rally. Red, white and blue balloons, streamers, straw hats and posters transformed the normally sedate San Diego Yacht Club into a deafening party of serious sailors and social climbers.

And when Dennis Conner flashed the thumbs-up sign to the ESPN cameras after his big finish at 12:15 a.m. (PST) yesterday, the yacht club crowd roared. It was as if the thumb was for them personally.

After all, Conner did practically grow up at that club. He was the club's commodore in 1984 and had sailed with or against practically all of the sailors present. And he was bringing the America's Cup to San Diego for the first time in history, to an obscure-looking club surrounded by millions of dollars worth of boats, on a man-made area called Shelter Island, near the mouth of San Diego Bay.

The gathering at the yacht club began about mid-afternoon Tuesday in a building that can comfortably accommodate a few hundred people. A barbecue with beef, grilled swordfish and, of course, apple pie operated through the night. By the time the race started, more than 1,000 of the casually opulent were there, cheering, carousing and commenting on the sailing conditions at Fremantle.

They knew this sport. If the wind fell off or picked up, heads wagged and encouragement was offered to the dozen or so TV monitors strategically placed throughout the club. If a spinnaker luffed after Stars & Stripes passed a marker, a collective "ooh" was heard and felt.

The seriousness of it all waned somewhat, though, as the night wore on and the people continued to stream through the door. Naturally, politicians showed up. So did a person dressed as the Statue of Liberty. Every time the ESPN cameras would leave Fremantle for a live shot of the yacht club, a new level of frenzy accompanied it. Other reporters, including those from television stations in France, Italy, Australia and many major US cities, were constantly interviewing and filming anyone or any group available.

When singer John Denver appeared, more distractions abounded.

But if the audience temporarily lost its purpose for being at the club, they were reminded each time their hero passed a marker — the crowd counted with the official clock how many seconds it took for Kookaburra III to pass the same marker. The number of seconds showed the size of Stars & Stripes' lead.

"If you take the number of seconds he's ahead by, and divide by two, it is the equivalent of the lead one football team has over another," said Jim

Nickel, a San Diego physician and sailor. "So if Conner is ahead by 60 seconds, it's like having a 30-point lead in football. Even 40 seconds is hard to overcome."

Conner won by 119 seconds.

Nickel observed the race with a combination of awe and admiration. "I used to sail against Dennis as a kid," he said. "And he always kicked my butt. He never lost."

The party also was a chance for members to stake their claim on how familiar they were with Conner. A dentist said he pulled Conner's wisdom teeth before the race Conner lost in 1983. He wouldn't speculate on a possible connection.

One woman in her 20s said Conner used to baby-sit her.

"Dennis Conner changed my diapers," she proclaimed.

The celebration was not without its potential side effects, however. Some of the more serious sailors are seriously afraid that the publicity generated by Conner and the hoopla experienced at the club will veer the organization off course.

"This is a serious club, not a social club," said Ted Quigley, a San Diego physician. "The members are hard-core about sailing, and there's a fear that bringing the Cup here will draw too big a crowd of socialites. They're even tearing down some of the tennis courts to make room for more boats. They want it to be for sailing."

"The real hard-core types are dying a little on the inside tonight."

Typically, Quigley said, the club has 20 to 30 people in it at one time. At brunch Sunday morning, no more than 12 tables were in use. And that was at peak time.

"Then you see this," he said, pointing to an army of journalists and cameramen surrounding the San Diego mayor or the live Lady Liberty, "and the rest of the world says, 'Typical California jerks.'"

But the cost for joining the club isn't that steep — about \$1,500 to enter and \$60 per month. But the decision to accept a new member is based on his or her six references and how seriously the applicant takes sailing.

"I didn't even know there was a TV in here until these final races began," one member said.

The club had to be anticipating the changes, though, in light of the publicity it knew was coming with the race. Within the last two years, new docks were built and the inside was redecorated.

Having Conner as the club commodore in 1984, the year after he lost the Cup, had something to do with the changes.

"Dennis is a very controversial person in the San Diego Yacht Club," Quigley said. "The club became much more intense after he became commodore, which the sailors liked and disliked. But he also brought in all of this publicity."